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Herder as an Interpreter and Critic

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HERDER AS AN INTERPRETER AND CRITIC

BY

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A. B. Lake Forest College, 1911

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## HERDER AS AN INTERPRETER AND CRITIC.

Criticism and interpretation have had a long history, a history almost as long as that of literature itself, for coincident with its beginning there is found also the beginning of that science of knowing and understanding literature, which we call criticism. The earliest evidence we have of criticism of literature is in the time of the Greeks. But they, unfortunately, knew only their own literature, and so were limited in their scope of judgment. Aristotle, who may be looked upon as speaking for the entire Greek nation, criticised his own native literature, (the only literature which he knew), and drew from his judgments general principles of good literature. The Middle Ages, though active along literary lines, did not busy themselves much with the direct practice of criticism. Later, however, and as literature came to be more widely known and appreciated, the art of criticism, too, was again revived, and gradually there grew up a school of critics who judged poetry and all literature according to a fixed set of rules which they had drawn up as fulfilling the requirements of the highest in literature. One who measured up to this standard, more or less mechanically applied, was approved by the critics; he who did not, but sought expression for his thought in his own way without due regard for form, was condemned. Not "what is the spirit



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or purpose of this work", but "what is its aesthetic effect" was the question with them. It was as though they said, "Here are the rules for a great writer, pattern your work after these, and a masterpiece will result." This attitude of the critics is to blame for much indifferent if not utterly worthless literature, for with one eye on the critic and his measuring rod, no man could do his best work.

For our present purpose, we are concerned chiefly with the criticism of the time just before Herder, particularly the so-called Swiss criticism of Bodmer and Breitinger. H. von Stein, in his "Entstehung der neueren Aesthetik", says: "Die Richtung auf das Ursprüngliche in der Poesie zeichnet die schweizerischen Aesthetiker aus und macht ihr Auftreten zu einer Epoche. Wollen die Schweizer einen Poeten preisen, so nennen sie ihn Naturdichter, Urdichter. Die Poesie überhaupt sprechen sie grössere Macht und Wucht zu, als Gottsched und die Franzosen." <sup>1</sup> Yet their criticism was in a great measure like that of the French, for they, too, had the idea of fixed norms or standards, and where such standards prevail there is present too, the attitude of the criticism of classicism. Bodmer said, "Wir wollen die Tugend und den Geschmack in unseren Bergen einführen", and goes on to speak of a plan for a complete system of aesthetics, in the spirit in which the French and earlier critics thought of a system or rules for writing. He says, further that every passion or emotion (Leidenschaft) has its own peculiar language to which the author must pay heed in writing; he must





also observe himself, for only in experiencing personally the emotions can he properly portray them for others. According to the Swiss critics, mere imitation of nature is not the highest art; rather should the author portray the extraordinary and uncommon. To quote Stein again, "Die Schweizer beachten also als das spezifisch Künstlerische der Poetischen Darstellung: eine Abweichung von der blossen Nachahmung der Natur. Diese wird nicht nur nebenbei gefordert- - - sondern als eigentlicher Gegenstand der künstlerischen Erfindung gefasst. - - - Die Kunst soll nicht dem alltäglich Wirklichen sich anheften, sondern sie soll das Ausserordentliche vor dem Gefühle verwirklichen."<sup>1</sup> Breitinger developed the idea of the miraculous (das Wunderbare) from the idea of the "new", which he got from the English. According to his idea, the miraculous must rest upon or be founded upon truth or reality, but lays aside the appearance of truth to disguise itself under a strange shape, and so appeals to our emotions. The Eighteenth Century saw a great movement daily gaining force in the mental life of the time, namely, a desire to return to the original sources of everything human. The narrow, established world of Europe was, in a sense, thrown into a state of confusion by the discovery that there were other lands, other peoples, other literatures even, than those which they had heretofore known. Gradually, they came to examine this strange, barbaric literature and to find in it evidences of that nature, unspoiled by culture and Gelehrsamkeit, for which they had been seeking, and the feeling

<sup>1</sup>Ibid. 293.





arose that one might learn something, perhaps, from these barbarians. It took the great, oft times sharply satiric Montaigne to startle the French from their complacent satisfaction in their stiff, formal poetry by saying, "Die Volkspoesie, ganz Natur wie sie ist, hat Naivitäten und Reize durch die sie sich der Hauptschönheit der künstlich vollkommensten Poesie vergleicht". Thus criticism became a creative, productive kind of art, seeking to recover the original nature and natural man. But though this kind of thought was in the air, the Swiss critics had not yet fully comprehended it, though they declared "unser Objekt ist der Mensch", they were as yet not clear as to the true character of this being they were seeking. The French were still drawing inspiration and authority from the Ancients; the English discovered aesthetic originality on native ground in their Shakespeare and Milton; the Swiss had, from their own past, nothing equal to compare with these. They turned to Germany and declared Opitz was the greatest poet of Germany "weil er der grösste Philosophus des Landes gewesen sei." In proof that they, though feeling the trend of the time, did not fully understand it, they term Opitz "rein, ungeschminkt, natürlich". Herder was to show them their error in his conception of natural man and literature. The Swiss were, in a true sense, creative critics, but they were hindered in the free expression of their ideas by their dependence upon other's opinions. Stein says, "Die Schweizer empfanden in mehreren Beziehungen original. Diess aus ihren Schriften darzustellen, ist dadurch erschwert, dass sie weder als Denker noch als Schriftsteller sich völlig sicher fühlen,



demnach nicht eher ruhen, bis sie für ihre aesthetische Ansicht eine Formel gefunden haben, welche mit den Prinzipien der französischen, englischen und italienischen Autoritäten übereinstimmt. Sie sind daher allerdings in dem grösseren Theil ihrer Schriften abhängig."<sup>1</sup>

Before turning to the main discussion of our paper, let us see how Herder himself defines a critic. In his "Zweite Sammlung von Fragmenten" he makes inquiry as to the critic in his relation to the writer, to the reader, and to the world of literature at large. Then follows the significant paragraph, "Dem Leser erst Diener, denn Vertrauter, denn Arzt. Dem Schriftsteller erst Diener, denn Freund, denn Richter; und der ganzen Litteratur entweder als Schmelzer, oder als Handlanger, oder als Baumeister selbst."<sup>2</sup> Herder speaks plainly against the practice of the critics who say "This only you must read, and to that you may not pay attention." The critic is to be rather the servant of the people, he is to minister to their tastes by showing them the good in literature and helping them to enjoy it; if their taste has become corrupted, the critic must see that it is made well again, he must educate the people, not dictate to them. But what is his relation to the author? Again, and first of all, the idea of a servant, of one who works under the direction of another, not of one who dictates to the author. But this conception yields to the other and really more important one; the critic is the friend of

<sup>1</sup>Ibid. 299.

<sup>2</sup>Herder's Sämtliche Werke, I, 246.





the author, and as such seeks to know and understand every thought of him whom he is to criticize. How difficult this is, Herder himself understood, for he says, "Unser Geist nimmt oft eine gewisse Unbiegsamkeit an, die uns hindert, in die Gedanken andrer uns gleichsam hineindenken zu wollen, und folglich sehr oft die unsere dadurch zu verbessern."<sup>1</sup> In this connection he deprecates the practice of authors who preface their books with excuses and apologetic compliments. But he has a third capacity in which the critic may stand in his relation to the author, namely, as a judge. He qualifies this, however, by the adjective "unpartheilscher," he is to be an impartial judge. "Suche ihn kennen zu lernen und als deinen Herrn auszustudieren; nicht als dein eigener Herr sein zu wollen."<sup>2</sup> The judge is not to be the arbitrary power, which coldly and outwardly measures a work according to a certain standard and then passes judgment; only after having understood the author's conception of his subject, after he has seen why the author planned to treat it just so, and what thought he was seeking to express, is judgment to be pronounced, and an impartial judgment, moreover, uncolored by personal views and prejudices.

Now as to the critic in his relation to literature as a whole. Here he has the triple office of welding together what has been created (Schmelzer); of assisting the work of creation (Handlanger) or even in some cases himself creating (Baumeister).

<sup>1</sup>Ibid. 247.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid. 247.





Not then to destroy without having something to put into the place of that which he puts aside; he is to have a constructive, not destructive tendency in his work.

These ideas, as Herder has expressed them, are good as far as they go, but they are, after all, only a small fraction of the wealth of ideas which we find in his writings. But one very real difficulty must be faced by the seeker after Herder's system of criticism, namely, the fact that nowhere do we find that system as such in Herder's works. But everywhere, one may almost say, throughout his works, we find his ideas scattered; now here, now there, and it is only by gathering up these fragments from among the entire mass of Herder's work that we can come to a complete understanding of his attitude toward criticism, his views and principles of it. How often while reading Herder, when one has come upon some great thought which with sudden power illumines the page and shines forth, as it were, from the sentences around it, as a vein of gold runs through the rock,-- how often and with what force does the wish express itself, "If only this man had turned his attention to the writing of a complete criticism, what a work that would be!" But that he did not do, and who shall say whether fortunately or not? For though it is said, and with truth, that Herder's work is only fragmentary and incomplete, yet we would be loath to lose any of these splendid, matchless fragments, even to gain a finished work on criticism or the other great thoughts which occupied his mind. Some day, perhaps, some one will undertake the task of gathering up all of Herder's ideas on criticism, and will



be well rewarded for his trouble. Before the magnitude of such a work, this paper can be only very fragmentary and incomplete, dealing with only a few of his early and more important views.

"Können wir die Morgenländer nachahmen?" (Zweite Sammlung von Fragmenten.)<sup>1</sup> With this question Herder enters upon a discussion of Oriental poetry and the German imitations of it, so popular at this time. He points out the fact that when Oriental expressions are used without fully being understood the result is ridiculous to one who knows the Orient. When the poets of the East spoke of the Jordan, of Lebanon, and Carmel, they had living pictures in mind, the places were native and real to them, and their mere mention called to mind a host of feelings and pictures for the most part foreign to the Germans. And even if these expressions are studied and partially understood, they must always be only ornaments to verse and not a vital part of it. But not only do the authors and poets of Herder's time use this mixture of Oriental expressions and write about Oriental things; what is far worse than this, they write of western happenings, and use the language of the East to express their thoughts. This practice was most distasteful to Herder, who had such a keen feeling for language and for the relation between thought and word, that he could find no adequate figure to express the nearness of the relationship but spoke of word and thought as identical. He gives expression to the wish that no one should write what he did not understand, and that the imitators of Oriental poetry would spend

<sup>1</sup> Ibid. 258.





their time studying and interpreting the original poems and thus come to a true understanding of them. But even granting that the authors who write these imitations do understand them; "are they then Jews, writing for a Jewish people?", Herder asks. That which would arouse the emotions and religious feelings of the Hebrews, leaves the alien reader cold and unmoved. But Herder does not mean, by these remarks, to condemn Oriental literature and disregard it. On the contrary, he himself was greatly interested in it and followed the suggestion which he gives others regarding it, namely, to study and interpret the poems. In his "Lieder der Liebe Die ältesten und schönsten aus Morgenlande" he has carefully studied and examined the writings; moreover he read Solomon's life, all that the Bible says of him, "ich ging, so weit ich konnte in den Geist seiner Zeit, seiner andern Schriften, brauchte sie zu Gewährsleuten, zu zeugen darüber, was auch Inhalt dieser Schrift sein müste."<sup>1</sup> Having thus prepared himself to read and understand the songs, he interprets them with rare sympathy and appreciation for their beauty, their purity, and their value to the Bible as a part of it, (a point as to which there had been some dispute among orthodox people.)

In the second division of the "Dritte Sammlung von Fragmenten" Herder discusses the modern use of mythology, which (following the trend of the times for something new and original) was much used by the writers of the day. He first asserts his

<sup>1</sup>  
Ibid. VIII, 591.



opinion that mythology is not to be intermingled in the spiritual poems of Christians, but does not intend entirely to do away with it as of no use whatever. On the contrary, if an author can use, for the better expression and explanation of his thought, some image or figure based on mythology, it is not only permissible but advisable that he do so. That, however, mythology is absolutely necessary for an author, (as had been contended) he denied; adding "es ist eine leere Furcht, ohne alte Mythologie werde man schlechtere und frostigere Verse machen."<sup>1</sup> To the assertion of certain poets and writers that one cannot write Odes without the use of mythology, Herder replies with the question as to the true purpose of the Ode. An ode which is to arouse true and real emotions in the reader must seldom become so buried in mythology that it is altogether lost. To quote from Herder one of the passages which so clearly set forth the idea; "- - - so sei es ganz und gar nicht die Haupt-Vollkommenheit einer Ode, so und so, nach diesen und jenen Mustern, mit der und jener Kunst angelegt zu sein, - - - dass sie die schöne Methode habe und was dergleichen schöne Regeln mehr sind, die nichts gelten. - - - Könnte ich's doch laut genug rufen, dass wer Horaz nachahmt, um ihn Nachzuahmen, und ein schönes, regelmässiges, künstliches und gelehrtes Gerippe seiner Oden darzustellen, noch kein Horaz sei, wenn er nicht den Zweck der Ode erreicht, uns den lebhaften Gedanken sinnlich darzustellen, dass jeder Zug der Horazischen Mythologie, die es für ihn thun konnte, aber für uns nichts zu diesem Zweck beiträgt, der Ode zuwider,

<sup>1</sup>Ibid. I, 433.





unnatürlich und Hinderniss sei; - - -"<sup>1</sup>

Herder warns against mythological references being used where the sense does not absolutely demand them, and only as superfluous ornament; for if they are thus used, the mind of the reader becomes confused, he seeks about for an explanation of the figure, and so loses its force. But perhaps the most important thought in all this discussion on mythology, is in the advice of Herder to study the spirit of the Ancients and find out how their mythology originated; then in using these images they will mean something, and will not be merely "ready-made" figures to be picked up here and there and placed in a work for effect, as one arranges the parts of a picture-puzzle. To sum up the argument, "man muss die Mythologie blos als Werkzeug brauchen, nicht als Zweck."<sup>2</sup>

Herder knew and respected the ancient Greek and Roman writers, and drew much inspiration from the study of their works and methods of working. While his son, August, was at school in Neuenburg, Switzerland, he wrote to him recommending him to read Homer, Xenophon, Horace, Virgil and Tacitus, and expressed pleasure at his enjoyment of Plutarch, who, a Greek himself, will give him a lasting impression of Greece.<sup>3</sup> Let us turn our attention then, for a moment, to what he has to say about Greek and Roman influence on German literature. The Germans, who in olden times called the Roman language barbaric, now have accepted it at the expense of

<sup>1</sup>Ibid. 437.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid. 439.

<sup>3</sup>Aus Herders Nachlass II. 432; 435.



their own, and in their thinking, writing and speaking have become slavish imitators of the Romans. Again, as so often, he deplores the fact that they learned the finished Roman thought and speech instead of following the development and learning how the Romans thought and spoke. Concerning the use of the Latin tongue, Herder points out that no matter how widely one may have read and studied the classics, yet the language can never be as living and as real as the mother tongue. If a German poet conceives a great thought and wants to express it, some way the thought forms itself into words, and any attempt to change those words changes the thought also. If, now, that thought is to be expressed in Latin, it does not take shape at once; the poet must first choose his words; perhaps he will find one which has just a little different shading in meaning, which does not quite express the thought, but which he must use for lack of a better one. Thus the thought which so beautifully and clearly expressed itself in the native tongue, has become distorted and without force in the strange language. We may then become imitators of Roman style and language, but in doing so we sacrifice thought and feeling, and our productions will become mere collections of phrases and expressions which have been taken from the ancient writers. Does Herder then condemn the use of Latin altogether? Indeed not; for Latin has become the language of all nations in the world of science and investigation; it is a bond to unite all the world and without it we could not have progressed as far as we have. But let it remain only as the





"Werkzeug der Gelehrsamkeit,"<sup>1</sup> and not as the language of literature and poetic thought, for as such it will rob the nations of their genius and destroy talent. As for the imitation of the style of the ancients, we must first consider the reason for their writing as they do. The ancients wrote, or rather spoke, for a definite end or aim, not merely for amusement; usually it was an argument before a court of the people where in a brief time the speaker, by his eloquence, had to gain the sympathy of his hearers, destroy the cause of his opponent, present his own and arouse approval for it. He had, therefore, to consider every word, to resort to every means in his power to gain a hold on the attention of his audience and maintain it until he gained his point. But how about the imitators of these ancients? They have neither the audience, the cause, nor the brevity of their models. How can they, then, adopt the tactics of an orator for an entirely different purpose and for quite different hearers? On account of the shortness of their words, lack of articles and great number of participles, the Romans bound together many phrases and clauses into one sentence; in imitation of this practice the Germans have made long, involved sentences which in spite of their artful construction practically defeat their purpose, for the mind is confused in its attempt to carry all these supplementary phrases and misses the pleasure which would have been given by the thought expressed in a less involved sentence.

<sup>1</sup> Herder's *Sämtliche Werke* I, 413.



In the "Journal meiner Reise" Herder makes some observations on French literature and authors. The high tide of French originality and talent is past, (he says), and men have turned their attention to the writing of "Memoirs, Vocabulaires, Encyclopedieen" and other works which require little originality. For some time past they have been borrowing largely from the Italian, adding to what they have thus obtained that which they called taste. They threw aside all that was emotional and at best are merely sentimental; all that is natural and life-like is put aside for etiquette and "galanterie;" humor and laughter are altogether frowned upon, but we have life a la mode, high society, and a drama which appeals only to reason. "Also ist nur eine gewisse Annäherung an die kältere, gesunde Vernunft, die die Franzosen den Werken der Einbildungskraft gegeben haben; das ist Geschmack und ihr Gutes. Es ist aber auch Erkältung der Phantasie und des Affekts, die sie ihm damit haben geben müssen, und das ihr Geschmack im bösen Verstande, der endlich nichts, als das bleibt, was Montesquieu Politische Ehre ist."<sup>1</sup> The French language, like the Nation, has not much inner strength or even originality; they depend, then, for good effects in writing, not so much on sheer argument or thought as on some novelty of expression, some clever turning of a phrase to please the reader. "Die Galanterie ist daher so fein ausgebildet unter den Franzosen als nirgends sonst. Immer bemüht, nicht Wahrheit der Empfindung und Zärtlichkeit zu

<sup>1</sup> Ibid. IV, 415.





schildern, sondern schöne Seite derselben, Art sich auszudrücken, Fähigkeit erobern zu können-ist die Galanterie der Französischen Romane und die Coquetterie des Französischen Styls entstanden, der immer zeigen will, dass er zu leben und zu erobern weiss. Daher die Feinheit der Wendungen wenn sie auch nichts sind - - -."<sup>1</sup>

Had Fontenelle put upon the content of his writings the care which he used in the expression, what a great writer he would have been! But the French never figure out truth for themselves, they simply take from various sources and so arrive only at a kind of near-truth. Now with all this 'Galanterie' and refinement, the literature has become something alien, improbable, and far removed from Nature; where there should be true feeling expressed, we have graceful compliments and witty speeches. Herder says, "Mit diesem Geist des Wohlstandes geht aber den Franzosen das meiste innre Gefühl weg! - - - Das wahre Lachen ist überdem aus der feinen, neuen Französischen Comödie so glücklich ausgestorben, als der wahre Affect von ihrem Trauerspiel. - - - Und es ist auch in der That nichts als Etiquette des Theaters, woraus sie das Hauptwerk machen."<sup>2</sup>

One of the best services which Herder rendered both to German Literature and criticism was to interest himself in the study of the folk-song and to stimulate the others to the study, also. Before going directly to Herder's views on the subject, I

<sup>1</sup>  
Ibid. 425.

<sup>2</sup>  
Ibid. 431; 432; 433.



shall here consider briefly the folk song as it had been known in literature up to this time. As has been said, the Eighteenth Century saw the beginning of a movement among great thinkers to return to primitive man, to a time when the emotions and feelings were as yet unspoiled by 'Kultur'. At this time, so far had the original, good nature been left behind, 'natur' and 'kultur' became almost directly opposed to one another in meaning. Herder, in an attempt to understand man as he had been in early times, read and studied the Bible, Arabic history and the literature of the Orient, seeking the 'Urquell des Sinnes.' The thought of the 'Wiedergeburt des Menschen' was the impulse back of the movement toward 'Volks poesie,' and it was a movement not confined to a limited territory, but general, all over the Nations; people began to listen again for the inner voice (die innere Stimme). With the discovery of other lands and other literatures (as found in the songs and chants of these wild people) came the inquiry as to whether there were no primitive peoples nearer home, which resulted in the discovery of the songs of the Finns and Lapplanders. It became necessary now to look upon poetry with an entirely different eye than had been done before; the narrow limits and set standards which were being used would not do, could not be used in judging these songs. Quite a different attitude of mind even, was necessary; the critics had been judging Homer all these years, had taken from him rules and norms to which others ought to conform, and all the time they had been utterly misunderstanding him. Her-





der came, and showed that Homer is 'Volks poesie'; what he has written is the expression of the feelings, the emotions, the spirit of his people; which, in a sense, have expressed themselves, not something exterior, from without and made according to rules. This was an entirely different point of view from that to which men had been accustomed, and upset many of their theories; if Homer is the expression of true feeling and emotion, then there can be no imitation of Homer unless there is present also similar feeling and emotion to that which inspired him. With this recognition of the source of true poetry came also a different idea as to criticism; no longer is it true that the learned only can judge the works of the poets (who belonged also to the learned class)-- - "Künstler können nur Künstler beurteilen" - - -but the judgment of the people was taken into consideration. Now the people, as such, first came into their own; before this they had been left out of the count altogether, or referred to only as the mob (Pöbel), but now they have become the people (das Volk).

Just what is folksong? We find, among primitive peoples, that any great emotion is expressed at first only in simple sounds or single words, then in a succession of words with various inflections of the voice until a rude kind of chant results; for these songs were not spoken, but as their name indicates, had a distinct melody or tune. And more than this, they were chanted to the accompaniment of gestures, facial expressions and movements of the body, which in their turn resolved themselves into a kind



of dance. Later, perhaps, the chanting and dancing were accompanied by some musical instrument, a drum or other primitive kind of instrument; but whether accompanied by such music or not, the chant and wild dance were common to our Indians and all primitive tribes. So deeply rooted and founded in our early history is this way of expressing joy, or sorrow, or fear, that today the words "song and dance" are still used in our proverbs, and when spoken give the feeling of belonging together. This early expression of the emotions was the beginning of our more modern drama, in which, by skillful blending of music, word, and gesture, we seek to express emotion. Perhaps, among the tribe or clan there were a few who were leaders in these ceremonies, though not the sole actors; all the people took part in them as they were stirred by their emotions, and the songs were known to all. To this fact their preservation is due; they were handed down from generation to generation, and from century to century, by word of mouth only; had they been the work of only a few, they could not have lived; but the feelings and emotions they expressed were common to all people and to all times, and so the songs became the possession of all, so, too, will they live and keep their power as long as human emotions endure.

In the "Viertes Kritische Wäldchen" Herder says, "Nationen, Jahrhunderte, Zeiten, Menschen -- nicht alle erreichen einerlei Grad der Aesthetischen Bildung"<sup>1</sup> and in the light of this

<sup>1</sup>  
Ibid. 41.





thought he studied the folksong. He tells us in the Essay "Über Ossian" (in "Von Deutscher Art und Kunst") under what conditions he read the folksongs; it was on his journey of 1769, during a storm at sea, while all about him, so different from the narrow life to which he had been accustomed as teacher, made him feel uncertain of himself; far from the secure standards and ideals which had surrounded him all his life, he found himself open to new and strange emotions, so that when reading these ballads he shared the feelings of the author, and in passing the scenes where the stories were laid, they became real, vital, human to him. In his study of the folk song, Herder is careful to state that his aim is not to set up new models for imitation, but to show how Nature is revealed in these first songs. In the "Zweite Sammlung von Fragmenten" Herder once said "- - - und es bleibt doch immer wahr; nichts bewegt die Menschliche Seele, als was selbst in ihr vorgehen kann,"<sup>1</sup> a reason for much poor criticism on the part of those who judged merely from without. Herder had as one of the chief articles in his creed the rule of 'Nachfühlen', that is, putting oneself in the place of the poet and feeling after him the emotions which caused him to write as he did. So Herder was able, deeply and truly, to appreciate these early, simple expressions of human, natural emotion.

<sup>1</sup>  
Ibid. I, 278.



In the "Ossian Aufsatz" he has several Lappland and Eskimo songs, which he reproduces and then interprets. He finds the free, bold rhythm the fitting expression of a people who live in a land of ice and snow; so, also, the words and the ideas which they convey, are different from the softer more pleasing songs of the Scotch and Southern races. It is charged against this poetry that it is the literature of wild, barbaric people, but it is just that fact which Herder is most pleased to find, for such people are nearest to nature, more nearly the complete, primitive man for whom the culture-weary world was seeking. And it is just because these people are not over-civilized and conventional that their poetry has the force and life that it has. Of course, some of this spirit is lost in the translation of the songs, and great care must be taken to preserve it even at the expense of rhyme; he bitterly reproaches Dennis for translating the songs into hexameter verse form, for in so doing he has destroyed their very nature and they are no longer folk song. In this connection Herder regrets that the German language has no elisions and few contractions such as the French and English have, and which are of great use to the translator. "Wissen Sie also, dass je wilder, d. i., je lebendiger, je freiwirkender ein Volk ist (denn mehr heisst dies Wort doch nicht!) desto wilder, d. i., desto lebendiger, freier, sinnlicher, lyrisch handelnder müssen auch, wenn es Lieder hat, seine Lieder sein! Je entfernter von künstlicher, wissenschaftlicher Denkart, Sprache und Letternart das Volk ist, desto weniger





müssen auch seine Lieder fürs Papier gemacht, und todte Lettern Verse sein; - - - ."<sup>1</sup>

Turning for the moment from the songs of the Northern bard, Herder gives us a Scotch ballad, which tells how a son, having murdered his father, reluctantly confesses to the crime under his mother's questioning, and finally in bitter remorse reproaches and curses her and his race, for it was his mother who had urged him to do the deed. Here again, as in Ossian, Herder points out the expression of emotion strongly felt in this primitive man, and we feel throughout the poem the deep tragedy which is revealed at its dramatic climax; the material for a whole play is compressed into the short space of a song. Then he reproduces for us and interprets some of the folk songs which are found among his own people, "Heidenröslein" and other songs, and in the words of an earlier work, says of them, "ich schätze diese Lieder sehr, denn sie wirken mehr auf das Herz, als einige andere. Und darnach beurteile ich den Wert eines Liedes."<sup>2</sup> (Zweite Sammlung von Fragmenten.

Moreover he expresses these sentiments, not once, but again and again in the course of his essay, and in other writings; repeatedly he calls attention to the emotional appeal, to the

<sup>1</sup> Ibid. V, 164.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. I. 263.



melody and rhythm, and to the force and movement found in the examples which he quotes. He closes his essay on Ossian with the practical suggestion that someone seek out and gather together the folk songs of Germany before they are forgotten and it is too late. England and France have felt themselves honored in the possession of folk songs, and have given their great scholars to the work of collecting them; while Germany which has, perhaps, an even richer store of treasure, through indifference and ignorance neglects it, and occupies herself with the modern poets and feeble imitations of the Greek and Oriental folk songs. Herder's chief merit in relation to the folk song is not that he made an exhaustive study and investigation of it, but that he opened men's eyes to the beauties of the folk song and pointed the way for future generations to work.

Herder's essay on Shakespeare ("Von Deutscher Art und Kunst-Über Shakespear") was one of his most exhaustive attempts to study a writer, and is one of the finest appreciations of an author to be found. Shakespeare was little known to Germany at large at this time; some of the literary men knew him from reading the plays in English, but to most he was quite unknown. There has been found a translation of "Romeo and Juliet" from the year 1758; it is, however, not Shakespeare's play as it was originally written, but the version of the play as worked over and presented on the stage by David Garrick. This translation appears in a collection of plays of Otway, Addison, and other dramatists, entitled "Neue





Probestücke der Englischen Schaubühne aus der Ursprache übersetzt von einem Liebhaber des Guten Geschmacks," Basel, 1758. In 1762-'66 we find a translation of Shakespeare in Weimar, and there are undoubtedly other scattered translations which once existed, but in general Shakespeare meant little to the German world of letters. This essay of Herder's is, therefore, most praiseworthy for its fine analysis, understanding and appreciation of the great dramatist.

He prefaces the study proper by a brief sketch of the development of the drama, giving in a few large, bold lines the history of the play from its origin, and no one is happier in the ability to spread out, panorama like, the field of a subject than is Herder. The drama arose through the Greek religion, and was a part of the worship; the chorus was the main part of the presentation, and interpreted by words, music and dance the religious rites which were performed. Naturally, therefore, there was simplicity, dignity, and brevity in their plays. Gradually, speaking parts were introduced, and slowly the play left the province of pure religion to become a more secular instrument. But still it retained its simplicity and slow movement, not because it was ruled that such was the proper thing for a play, but because conditions demanded it; their stage (usually out of doors) was large, the actors walked upon stilts to increase their stature in order that the people might see them from a distance; naturally they had to move deliberately and express themselves simply, as any quick



movement or subtle expression, even if it were possible, would be lost upon the audience witnessing the performance. But as time went on and conditions changed there arose an error regarding these things, and since the Greek drama was the highest to be found, people began to study it to see how it was made, and finally evolved from it a set of rules which they laid down as being the principals of a good play. The French were particularly zealous in this direction, and in the course of time developed a cold, stilted, regular form of drama which, though outwardly conforming to the rules which they had drawn from their models, since it was not based upon reality, had not the inner action and purpose which is the soul of a play, and so missed entirely the goal which had been set, namely, to be like the Greek drama.

With the English, says Herder, the case has been quite other-wise. Their drama is a discovery, Eine Erfindung, evolved from their own history, religion, tradition and customs of life. If we glance back over the history of the drama in England, we find the early miracle and mystery plays which (in a way similar to the Greeks) originated in the church for the purpose of explaining the Scriptures and showing the people in a concrete form the story and lessons contained therein. On its removal from the churches, for which it had grown too large, the drama passed from the hands of the clergy into the control of the laymen, and as might be expected, became changed in character. Episodes which had no foundation in Scripture were introduced, found favor, and gradually grew until





the play had become more a source of amusement than of instruction. "Und wenn nun in dieser glücklich oder unglücklich veränderte zeit, es eben Ein Alter, Ein Genie gäbe, das aus seinem Stoff so natürlich, gross und original eine Dramatische Schöpfung zöge, als die Griechen aus dem Ihren - - und diese Schöpfung eben auf den verschiedensten Wegen dieselbe Absicht erreichte, wenigstens an sich Ein weit vielfach Einfältiger und Einfach vielfältiger -- also - - - ein vollkommenes Ganzes wäre -- was für ein Thor, der nun vergleiche und gar verdamme, weil dies zweite nicht das Erste sei? Und alle sein Wesen, Tugend und Vollkommenheit beruht ja darauf, dass es nicht das Erste ist, dass aus dem Boden der Zeit, eben die andere Pflanze erwuchs."<sup>1</sup>

Shakespeare found conditions much as the Greeks had; he found the puppet plays and other rude forms of drama, and from this imperfect material he wrought and fashioned a splendid instrument for the expression of human emotions and the bettering of mankind. For the merit of a true playwright does not lie in evolving a play from an abundance of simple ideas, but in working together, into a unified and perfect whole, the multitude of complex forms which he finds at hand. Shakespeare found no simple mythology, religion and history as the Greeks had; but from the complex, varied life which he found, he created a perfect, complete whole; he took the mass of customs and fashions which he found in many forms in the

<sup>1</sup> Ibid. V, 217-218.



extent of his broad land, and turned them to his own use. Herder speaks of him not merely as a poet, but as "ein Sterblicher mit Götterkraft begabt" and "Schöpfer."

Three plays are analyzed during the discussion on Shakespeare, the great tragedies "Lear," "Othello," and "Macbeth." With what enthusiasm and love does Herder set forth the ideas as told in Shakespeare's story! Words seem to fail him in adequately expressing himself; he uses pictures, comparisons, and ejaculations; the lines seem to hurry along with a kind of breathless intensity, closing with an expression of wondering admiration which makes them seem alive. Word upon word he tries fully to express his thought, speaking of Lear after his ruin, - - - "bittend, betend, bettelnd, fluchend, schwärmend, segnend,"<sup>1</sup> - - and the whole human tragedy passes before us as our eyes follow the words. And in characterizing the play, he calls it "ein Vater--, Kinder--, Königs--, und Narren-- und Bettler-- und Elend-- Ganzes," picturing the unity of the many different threads which go to make up the whole. Having analyzed the plays, he discusses briefly the unities of Time and Place, which he does not consider as of much importance. Who, he asks, would sit with watch in hand to exactly time the length of an act or scene; and who have thoughts for unity of place while watching the unfolding of a play on the stage? "Sollte es denn jemand in der Welt brauchen demonstrirt zu werden, dass Raum und Zeit eigentlich an sich nichts, dass sie die relativeste Sache auf Dasein, Handlung, Leidenschaft, Gedankenfolge und Mass der Auf-

<sup>1</sup> Ibid. 220.





merksamkeit in oder ausserhalb der Seele sind?"<sup>1</sup> Shakespeare works in the extent of all time; and in place, limits himself only to the entire world.

In the "Viertes Kritische Wäldchen" Herder gives his definition of poetry. Some writer of the time, whom Herder quotes had defined it in this fashion, "Dichtkunst ist die Kunst, vollkommen sinnliche, schöne, imaginativ und successive Producte, vermittelt einer vollkommenen Harmonischen Rede darzustellen".<sup>2</sup> Herder hated abstractions, words without pictures or meanings, and sharply takes to task anyone who would obscure a thought by such a long, abstract, involved definition. He says simply, "Poesie ist vollkommen sinnliche Rede,"<sup>3</sup> and we have a brief, clear thought which can be readily grasped and understood. In trying to express his ideas more fully, Herder says in continuation that each one of the fine arts,---that is, music, sculpture, painting,---has its own particular province and its own ideal of beauty. Music appeals to the hearing, and depends for its effect upon variations in sound; to express the beautiful in music is therefore more difficult than to place it concretely before one in sculpture. In music, each sound makes its impression and passes away, and so on through the entire composition, whereas a piece of sculpture is

<sup>1</sup> Ibid. 227.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. IV, 129.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. 131.



always there; if a point has been forgotten, or imperfectly conceived, the observer may go back and retrace the lines, thus gaining once more an idea of the perfect whole. But in its very concreteness there lies a danger for sculpture, for if there is a blemish it remains there always to offend the taste of the perfect touch; therefore the statue more than anything, must be as nearly perfect as possible. Painting has a larger and freer scope than either of these Arts, for with a few lines, and proper care as to lights and shadows, color, background and perspective, it may portray figures as real as the sculptor, with the added advantage of simulating movement and even the sound of music (as by dancing); the eye takes upon itself the functions of touch and hearing, satisfying all senses at once. But poetry, he says, "ist mehr als stumme Malerei und Skulptur; und noch gar Etwas ganz anders, als beide, sie ist Rede, sie ist Musik der Seele. Folge der Gedanken, der Bilder, der Worte, der Töne, ist das Wesen ihres Ausdrucks; hierin ist sie der Musik ähnlich."<sup>1</sup> But if poetry is the sum or essence of all the arts, its task is also more difficult, for by means of mere words it must portray sound, movement, color, substance, and passion; all must appear before the eye of the reader at the author's bidding.

As for criticism, Herder's one strong point, on which he insists again and again, is to understand the author, under-

<sup>1</sup>  
Ibid. 166.





stand what he was trying to do, test his plan, and then judge him; --the idea of feeling after, Nachfühlen. "Beständig mit und statt seines Autors denken zu können"<sup>1</sup> is the duty of a true critic. At another time he says (in the "Erste Sammlung von Fragmenten"), "Ein wahrer Kunstrichter - - - muss nicht Bücher, sondern den Geist beurteilen, - - - und nicht ihr System, sondern ihr Urbild verbessern. Solange man nicht Ideen in ihre Quelle zurückzulenken weiss, in den Sinn des Schriftstellers: so schreibt man höchstens wider ihn - - - ." <sup>2</sup> A critic, therefore, who himself cannot feel the ambitions which stirred the author, who does not know the plan of his work and can not point out its weaknesses there, cannot judge the author; no external application of fixed rules is a true criticism.

That Herder practised his own rules of criticism is apparent to the most casual observer. He could, undoubtedly, have found faults in the oriental poetry, folk songs, and writers whom he read, and he knew, too, the false standard of criticism which was too often used by others; but always we find him putting himself in the proper mood, going behind mere exterior things to get down to fundamentals, and then with rare sympathy and understanding expressing his opinion. Klopstock, who rarely if ever

<sup>1</sup>  
Ibid. I, 142.

<sup>2</sup>  
Ibid. 142.



acknowledged the criticism of any man, wrote to Herder asking him for his opinion on his "Hermann's Schlacht" giving his reason in these words, "Die Hauptursache davon ist, weil Sie durch Ihre eignen sehr starke Empfindung Criticus sind."<sup>1</sup> The power of feeling in himself, Nachfühlen, the emotions felt by other authors gave him his great power in criticism and interpretation. Saintsbury in his "History of Criticism" defines criticism as "the endeavor to find, to know, to love, to recommend, not only the best, but all the good that has been known and thought and written in the world".<sup>2</sup> Before the breadth and dignity of this ideal, the narrow criticism of the French school and their followers must necessarily fall into oblivion. That Herder was a true exponent of this ideal can be stated without hesitation, for he was one of the few men of the times who had a catholic taste in literature, who drew from all lands and all literatures for his reading and study. To quote Saintsbury again, "Herder betook himself, as nobody had done before him, to the comparative study of literature, to the appreciation of folk song (perhaps his best desert), to the examination of Ancient, Eastern, Foreign literature in comparison with German."<sup>3</sup> The influence of such a study had to be, and was, felt in the world of letters, and we have Herder to thank for the movement toward a better, saner, truer kind of criticism.

<sup>1</sup> Aus Herders Nachlass I, 202.

<sup>2</sup> Saintsbury History of Criticism III, 611.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. 356.





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